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## INNIE/OUTIE

JOSH ROACH

25 Pages

My practice is focused around the characters that I become through the wearing of things that I have made, and the subsequent performances that I do in both constructed and real-world spaces. This paper outlines how my practice is framed by own experience of coming out as a queer person, how that experience relates to my love of play and materials, and how they both inform the strategies I use to relate the ideas surrounding queerness, sexuality, and gender to my audience.

**KEYWORDS:** queer, performance, body, character, creature, costume

INNIE/OUTIE

JOSH ROACH

A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

School of Art

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2019

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INNIE/OUTIE

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members and the broader ISU School of Art community for helping me push my art practice forward. I would also like to thank my MFA cohorts, especially the handful of them whom I've bonded with deeply and who helped me throughout this whole experience. Thank you to my friends and family, and my deepest thanks to my mom and my husband, both of whom offer me the most love and support in my life.

J. R.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

My practice is focused around the characters that I become through the wearing of things that I have made, and the subsequent performances that I do in both constructed and real-world spaces. My characters have been expressed through video and live performance, in surreal settings and worlds, with slow ritualistic movements. I am interested in how my characters can create their own sense of ritual or set of parameters that they use to navigate their worlds, objects within their worlds, and each other, that both parallel and challenge the standard set of western cultural norms that our society uses. My work has always been a type of self-portraiture, so these characters embody a lot of what I am (queer, sex positive, big, funny) and the sub-cultures I belong to (kink, furry, bear culture to name a few). My work is personal and I aim to extend my vulnerability, humour, and playfulness to critically engage with what society considers difficult subject matter (ideas on gender, feminism, social justice, queerness, mental illness, body image, sexuality) on an audience that may find themselves disconnected from that subject matter. The broad materiality of my work, which has qualities of feeling both highly considered and playfully slapped together, seems very personally touched by a maker and this personal touch is a tool I use to evoke a feeling of connectedness between the viewer and the things I make. I situate my work in an in-between space amid different ideas or materials, where the definitions of things become slippery. I enjoy this space because not only is it queer in the sense that it is hard to pin down, but it is also a transition zone where things can bleed into each other and become something that is perhaps totally new yet familiar. Finding the moments when one thing starts to become something else has become a driving force in my practice... space where moments of transformative catharsis occurs.

## CHAPTER II: COMING OUT (BECOMING JOSH)

I can't help but map this idea of a thing becoming something else onto my own experience of coming out and queer culture/sensibilities as a whole. Every piece of art I have made since I started art school about thirteen years ago has revolved around a self-reflection of my own sense of being within my current environment. Early on, that sense was conflicted and was bracketed within a refusal of my sexuality and an inexhaustible frustration with my social awkwardness. Both of these fed off of each other and the work I made during these beginning years visually reflected this. My work has always been sincere. I look back at it now and see sexual frustration and an unease with my body and my personality. It was crippling, yet I still knew that there was something about play (play with materials, colours, forms) that kept me hooked on making. I made when I couldn't speak. I made when I couldn't write. I made to get it all out there. Coming out was difficult for me as I just didn't want it to be a big deal. I didn't want to be a big deal. I was very shy, and I was very private. I was someone who had a giant shell around me at all times. A shell I wore. A shell I performed in. The more I made things, the more aware I became of that shell, and it began to break away. The more it broke away, the more I could see that beautiful, colourful world around me. I made to come out.

I met my husband Ryan when I was twenty-four. I bring him up here because everything I make now is a result of finding him. He changed my life. For the first time since I was a kid, I felt comfortable in my own skin. I knew I was loved by people in my life, but he made me *feel* love. Our bodies felt love, our bodies melded together. I felt happiness to my core, not the fleeting happiness that I knew before. My parents were in a very unloving relationship, so growing up I always saw that kind of love as phony. I felt love for my family and knew that my family loved me, but outside of that I doubted that love really existed and

felt that I didn't need it in my life. I think a big part of me felt unlovable, and because of that I shut people out. So I would just make. I made creatures that felt unworthy, I made things that felt confused. However, through their making, I understood myself a little bit more. I had no idea what the fuck any of it meant... but it felt like it expressed something that I didn't otherwise know how to communicate. It was weird, and I was slowly becoming more okay with that. That physical and emotional connection gave me a new understanding of things, and greatly informed my work.

I have a hard time pinning down what queerness actually is, and I think that territory is a place where I want my creations to reside. Ryan exposed me to a ton of queer media that I really didn't know anything about, and it has totally shaped my aesthetics, gestures, and portrayals of characters in my practice. A large part of the coming out process for me was becoming aware how much truly amazing queer culture there was in the world. It was liberating, hilarious, campy, outrageous, sexual, critical, weird, and unabashed. Did I mention funny?

The sensibilities of queer culture happened to line up with my own sensibilities, especially humour, which allowed me to feel an affinity for things like John Waters films right away. I was raised in a big family that always lived within the realm of *trash* (we fought and laughed constantly and were raised on television – Simpsons, Jerry Springer, video games) so watching films like *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* just seemed like an extension of that, except it was explicitly about sexuality, bad taste, and punk queerness. From there, I became obsessed with David Lynch and his surreal, grotesque, realm of familiar-unfamiliarity. Seeing the little creature in *Eraserhead* spill its spray foam (Great Stuff?) was not only visually striking, but something about the utilization of an 'art material' like spray foam, which at the time I had used heavily in my practice, in this surreal creature video format changed the way I thought

about body and moving image. Both of these filmmakers have had a pretty large impact on my practice, perhaps more-so than any visual artist, and they led me to other artists and aspects of queer culture that have affected me and my practice.

I spend a lot of time thinking about David Lynch's use of characters and light in space, which he uses to create a surreal tone and sense of anticipation (I'm thinking specifically about his 2002 web series *Rabbits*).<sup>1</sup> There is a sense of uneasy awareness between the rabbit characters and the in-film audience (represented by a laugh-track). By that I mean both parties seem aware of each other's existence but there is some kind of disconnect between the two that is ominous and chilling.

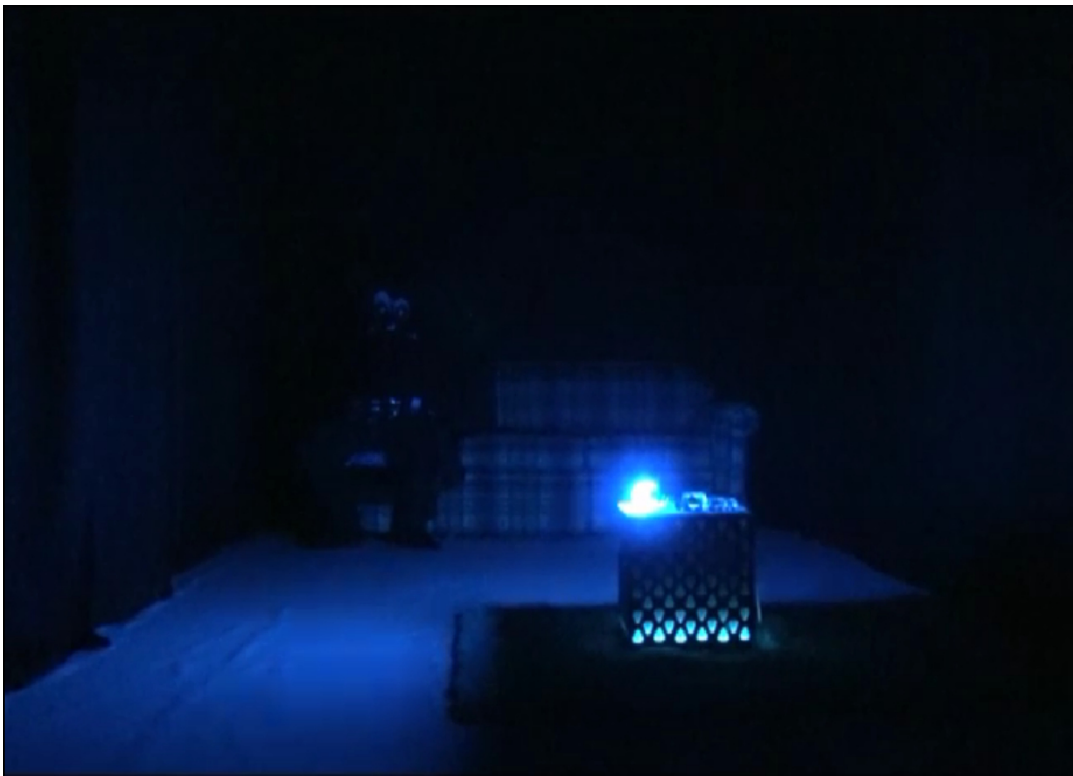
With the "innie" portion of my performance/installation piece *innie/outie*, I've created a similar sort of disconnect with my audience in a constructed space. In the back video room in CVA 110, I have draped black fabric around every wall and created a hallway to lead an audience member into a dark room (I'm also reminded of Lynch's use of red velvet to create walls in *Twin Peaks*). Inside this room, there is a couch and a television monitor across from the couch, as well as a wooden box with something moving inside of it. I, as the character *chuckers*, am seated on an extended portion of the couch. My character (from the point of view of the television) was previously filmed living in that space and interacting with the objects in it, and that recording is playing on the monitor (see *Figure 1*).

During the performance, I attempted to mimic the actions that I performed for the video. All the while, audience members were encouraged to sit on the left side of the couch with my character (through a vinyl text panel on the wall.) This direction immediately created a sense of confusion over which side of the couch was the left side, and made people who entered the space more aware of their body in relation to the space, as well as to my character. *Chuckers* would

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, David. "Rabbits." <http://rabbits.batbad.com/>. (accessed March 10, 2019).

also get up off of the couch at various points of the performance, stand in front of the people seated on the couch, and stay there while looking at them. This action prevented people from getting up and leaving the space, while also making them very aware that they would be leaving my character and the other audience members if they did leave the space. They became aware that their actions would have implications on the performance, and had to wrestle with the potential guilt/unease they felt because of that.



*Figure 1: |herenothere|. Video still, mixed media. 2019.*

It is my hope to create a push/pull between a sense of inclusion and separation. The audience members are in the space with the character, but are not present in the video. They are on the couch with my character, but my character is on an extended portion of the couch made of the same material that my costume is made of. Body and material bleed into one.

### CHAPTER III: BODY-MATTER

Bodies have always been in the images and objects that I've rendered, but over the past year they have become more fleshed out and expressive. I perform because I like how my body (and other peoples bodies) can become something new. A body that is altered in some way, such as being in costume, has the potential to break away from problematic binaries, stereotypes and gender norms that have been culturally and socially attributed to bodies. Society ridiculously privileges some bodies over others, and my aim is to highlight that absurdity while also creating a space that is inclusive and not defined in the same ways. Bodies can break down and become a fluid thing. Emotions are so tied to the physicality of our being, so I respond to the potential of striking both empathy and humour through the expression of performance. Bodies are inherently empathetic in that they are something everybody has experience with, and thus can relate to. Everyone can relate to the physicality, possibilities, and limitations of a body, not to mention its mortality, grossness, and beauty (albeit in different ways.) What I create is a reflection of the body; my body, your *body*, *somebody*, *everybody*.

*body*

I like the possibility of using bodies as a framework to situate the *other-worldly-ness* of my creations within, as I think that grounds them in a sense of familiarity, understanding, and feeling (particularly empathy). The relationship between body and material is not only a symbiotic one in my practice, but sometimes body and material begin to meld into one. I want to also point out here that the body **is** material. We are material, just like some fabric, or paint, or silicone is material. The costumes I create are another skin I get to live in, or a shell I get to wear. To extrapolate that further, space can act as another skin. Not just the space between my skin and the skin of a costume, but the space between costume and audience. In her book *Queer*

*Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed talks about how spaces aren't separated from bodies, and instead "spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body."<sup>2</sup> I often think of this in relation to constructing space for my characters, and how that can connect to and envelope an audience within, and with my creatures.

In Chapter II, I spoke about my shell that I had growing up and how it felt crippling until I came out and it broke away. The shells I get to wear now don't feel crippling or make me feel like I'm hiding. They make me feel *me*... more-so then not wearing them. They are a space where inhibitions break away and I can be weird and expressive and queer and a bit unhinged. They make me feel safe and exposed at the same time. They are an escape, but an escape from this reality into something that is more real, more exposed. I get that is an odd thing to say considering I'm literally covering my body up in more materials, but when body and material muddle into something more fluid, then perhaps I'm just creating the newest layer that gets me to somewhere else, somewhere more honest.

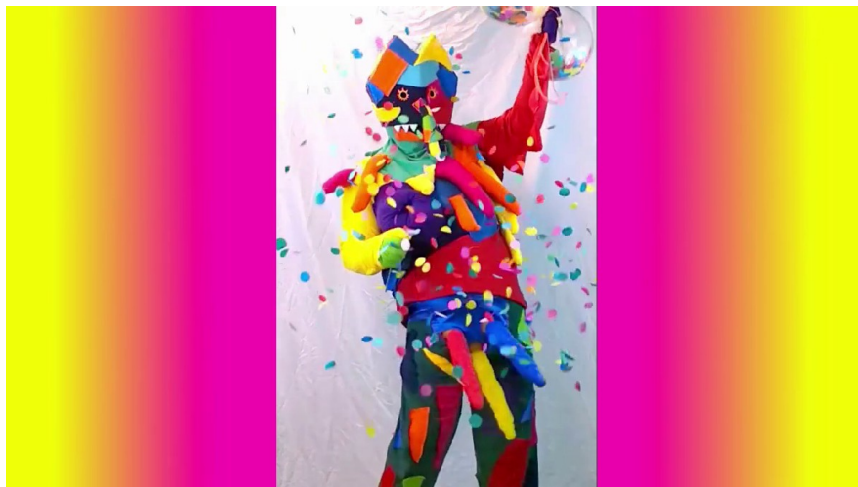
An artist that I think about in relation to performance, inhibition, and sexuality (albeit in more explicit ways than me) is Annie Sprinkle. She would do performances that were highly sexual and vulnerable at the same time, such as "Public Cervix Announcement," in which she spread her legs and invited audience members to look at her cervix with a flashlight.<sup>3</sup> While this is more explicit than I want to be in my work, I like the idea of creating a sense of both vulnerability and liberation through the use of ones body. Annie's work had to be explicit to take control of her female body and liberate her sexuality in a time where those conversations were not happening. She needed to *shock* in order to get noticed and to make an impact in a world that dismissed many forms of female agency and objectified female bodies. My work isn't trying to

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2 Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. 9.

3 Carr, Cynthia. "A Public Cervix Announcement." In *On edge: performance at the end of the twentieth century*. Rev. ed. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. 175-76.

do that, but is instead trying to engage with contemporary ideas surrounding gender and sexuality, in a time where imagery of sex and genitalia is not as shocking. I want the sex in my work to be a bit funny and sexy, while also retaining the kind of personal vulnerability that Annie had in her work. I see myself having parts of my nude body exposed, or in the process of being exposed, in future projects. This could also encourage audience members to reconsider their preconceived notions of sexuality and genitalia, as there's space to play with their expectations (having them expect my genitalia but instead they get four giant floppy silicone dongs underneath a gaping purple vagina-mouth!)



*Figure 2: popper party. Video still, mixed media. 2018.*

I look to an artist like David Henry Brown Jr. as well, as he is constantly cranking out videos (part of his *Resemblage* series) which feature absurdly hilarious amalgamations of his body mixed with objects, food, and art material.<sup>4</sup> He is an artist that seems to be as prolific as me (if not more so!), so it is both of interest and inspiring to me to see him upload so many quick and silly videos that are wildly creative and outrageous. I too, would like to create more short videos featuring my creatures doing things (random and scripted) as I think a collection of them can start to construct a narrative and flesh out what the characters are like and what they do. One

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<sup>4</sup> Instagram. "David Henry Nobody Jr." [instagram.com. https://www.instagram.com/davidhenrynobodyjr/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/davidhenrynobodyjr/?hl=en). (accessed March 11, 2019).



such example is my short video *popper party* where my character *kuckeroo* comes on screen and pops some confetti-filled balloons (see *Figure 2*). This video was just a thirty second clip, but within that there is a sense of celebration and joyousness for this floppy-donged creature, that was short-lived and a bit unsatisfied.

In another video, *kuckeroo* throws a bunch of confetti-like beads in the air and they crash down on its head in slow motion. Again, there is a sense of celebration while also a dissatisfaction in the event that just happened. These clips begin to construct a character that is a naive and joyous, while also trepidatious about the fleeting nature of their joy. Contrasting this work with that of Brown Jr's, and I feel like his creations are a bit *one note* in that they are just outlandish and silly, and don't really build up a narrative or history as individual characters (outside of his own artist persona of David Henry Nobody Jr.). I want to make short videos that aren't as formulaic in structure, and perhaps start to emphasize patterns of ritual while constructing worlds for my creatures to live in. I hope to create multiple short videos, and longer video/performance projects around many of my characters to really flesh out them out.

## CHAPTER IV: MATERIALS (A LOVE LETTER)

Material play has always driven my practice. I love the amalgamation of hard, soft, gooey, shiny, pokey, and colourful materials and how they can have an idiosyncratic dialogue with each other. I respond to the weird moments when materials that are contradicting (through texture, colour, form, etc.) come together and work as one thing. My objects live as both gross and beautiful, clunky and graceful, messy and refined, stupid and smart, awkward and sexy, confrontational and reflective, fake and real, our-world and other-world. The moment when the phenomenological qualities of a material or an object muddle and become something queer (odd, wonderful) is always something that I strive for, and focuses how I want my objects to operate in the world (my constructed worlds and the *real* world).

Transformation can happen through materials and their juxtapositions. Not only do I love how a material sets, cures, flops, melts, oozes, sticks, crumbles, but I love it when you can take a material object and place it with another, perhaps completely different material object, and totally change how that object operates compositionally, texturally, colour-wise, conceptually, etc. Some of the most rewarding moments in my practice are when I take something that I have made that I am frustrated with and combine it with another object/material, totally subverting how it was functioning visually and conceptually. Like fabric.

I habitually love going to thrift stores and collecting a colourful medley of different fabrics. I use these fabrics in my work to point to clothing/fashion/design and the gendered connotations of textiles. Fabric can be transgressive, especially in relation to political and social constructs, not to mention the hierarchy between craft and art itself (I think of queer artists like Mike Kelly and Allyson Mitchell who have used fabrics to satirically challenge high and low

culture and stereotypes surrounding lesbians, respectively)<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>. Fabric is (generally) soft. Hug-able. I like how fabric speaks with concepts of masculinity, such as how some fabrics that tend to be heavier (jean and leather, usually in blues and blacks) are attributed with being more durable, rough and tumble, and hard-edged. Feminine clothing is way more fab and colourful, while they're also quite often light, semi-transparent, and airy. I like the idea of capturing both these tropes with the things that I make, both in costume form and in the articles of clothing that I wear everyday. One of my favorite articles of clothing that I've altered to wear has been this *stupid* green camo-tie-die pattern hunting shirt with a buck on it. It reeks of overt masculinity, but I've taken it and adorned it with pink patches of fabric with fluffy cats on it.

I am pointing (constantly) to the phallus, and it's relation to power, dominance, and desire, but also humour, pathetic-ness, and sadness. My art is full of moments of floppy silicone, soft and plushy spires, oozing drippy drops that relate to secretion of body fluids. I am pointing to love by way of how much I love to make. I am pointing with celebration and glam through the use of saturated colours, glitter, sequins, feathers, gloss, lights and sound. I am pointing to how much I care for the messy moments we would typically pay no heed. I don't want to live in a clean world, as the world isn't clean. It's messy as fuck. Having said that, I am realizing more and more how important moments of clarity and slowness can function in a really powerful way to contrast and highlight the messy moments that I deem most important. There is a pathos in playful, messy spontaneity, and by isolating or extruding it into a quieter space, that pathos can perform as the lead. The stuff I make is colourful, playful, and has a celebratory feel to it while also sometimes being a bit ominous and flippant. My broad sense of materiality plays into those

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5 Grosenick, Uta, and Burkhard Riemschneider. "Mike Kelley" In *ART NOW*. Rev. ed. Cologne: Tacschen, 2005. 144.

6 Chaich, John, and Todd Oldham. "Artist Interviews" In *Queer Threads: crafting identity and community*. Ammo, 2018. 162-63.

feelings while also having the quality of being both slapped together and considered, with a strong sense of the "maker's touch" coming through everything I create.

I have been working on projects (specifically video and live performance) that require a lot of planning because there are so many moving parts. With that being said, leaving a lot of moments of creative spontaneity is of the utmost importance in my practice. I have ideas and knowledge of how different materials will function in my work, but it is only through their enactment that their function becomes palpable. I sometimes encourage the things I make to *fuck up*, as I find responding to unexpected consequences incredibly rewarding and a reason why I continue to make. There is a power in subverting the associations of different materials, whether that is by reclaiming its pejorative agency as a point of liberation or re-framing it in a context that allows it to highlight the absurdities of those associations.

I have an idea of how *innie/outie* will function when I perform it, but there are lots of opportunities to learn from how intimate the viewer chooses to be with my character in the space I created. There are moments where it doesn't look like my character is interested in or even aware of the people around it, but there are also moments where it seems like it is. All of this is exacerbated by the non-inclusion of the audience in the video, as they are simultaneously in the space and not. I believe the audience will be able to tell this is both a type of everyday-domestic space for my creature, but also a surreal and sacred one. By extension, I hope they feel like it is an important space too, but can't totally piece together why. If I can get across a bit of dissatisfaction while still harnessing a feeling of connectedness, then perhaps I can probe my audience to extend their empathy and understanding to my creature, and vice versa.

## CHAPTER V: [IN BETWEEN]

I've really become engaged with the relationship of body and sculpture, and the idiosyncratic dialogue that's created when the two interact or become one... like creating a person-sculpture hybrid that ultimately becomes another form of creature/character. In relation to this, I think a lot about performing gender and how that performance effects every aspect of our society and how it constructs us in it. I think physical gestures can point to specific things without dictating or explaining what those things are, as human physicality is something everybody has some experience with. The body is a vessel for so many things, so performance becomes this kind of conduit between viewer and art. Between this world and *other world*.

I think a lot about gender in my work, both how I represent gender and how that relates to my own identification with gender. Growing up, toxic masculinity fed into most of everything that I did including my discomfort with my sexuality and placement within the societal structures of masculinity. My mother was my best friend and most important person to me all of my life, but I always had a toxic relationship with my father, so that also led me to always feel an unease with identifying with concepts of masculinity. My sexual confusion/denial also led me to gravitate towards being homophobic as a way to mask who I really was (these aggressions were never egregious, but they also didn't do anything to support queer people or combat homophobia). A lot of what I do now and what I stand for comes from a place of knowing what its like to be complacent to structures of homophobia, sexism, and racism. I want to create characters that combat that complacency and celebrate inclusion, while combating problematic structures.

I think of the characters that I make not being confined to specific genders, while still *pointing around* specifically gendered things – whether those things be genitalia, material (patterns, colours, textures), gestures, or actions. To use my video ~>*touchiefelie*<~ (see

Figure 3) as an example, I knew that I wanted two characters on screen, with one character (*jars* (*dangles*)) taking on a more dominant role and the other character (*pinkone*) taking on a more submissive role. *jars* (*dangles*) has dangley bits on its breasts and groin, referring to boobs and a dick, whereas *pinkone* has gaping red hole that *jars* reaches into to pull out a giant phallic like horn, referring again to both male and female parts. *pinkone* is rigid and submissive, and *jars*, although taking on a more aggressive and dominant role, is curvy and quite sultry in its movements. There is a lot of play with roles here, but there is also something new and strange created; an alien thing reflecting on societal norms regarding gender norms and sexuality. My hope is that a viewer can look at this weird thing and be confused about the gender and sex of these creatures, but question why they might have to compartmentalize or define that confusion. These creatures lovingly embrace at the end and both consent to the actions performed, so their happiness is all that matters. They can just be, so why can't we?

I think of how a queer thing is constantly liminal; we can kind of point around it but it seems to operate as a blurry thing. The way that I am starting to express material decisions through the body (through my body) makes the pointing that I'm doing more specific, as it becomes grounded in familiar gestures and actions, as well as in the composition of body parts (how



Figure 3: ~>touchiefeelie<~. Video still, mixed media. 2018.

a face is constructed of two eyes and a mouth, how an arm may be situated in relation to a torso, etc.). By becoming something other than normal they open up possibilities of transcendence, for reflection and critique. I think of Nick Cave's *soundsuits* in this regard; as being something that transcends our definitions on identity, gender, and race by concealing the performers bodies.<sup>7</sup> In *innie/outie*, there are several costumes that showcase this.

These costumes are both hung without any bodies in them, and projected in video form on a screen, where bodies are performing in them. The costumes operate between *empty* shells that a viewer can imagine wearing and beings that they can relate their bodies to. The six costumes flank the gallery space on opposite walls and are hung to be slightly taller than my height, making them seem larger than life. These pieces are adjacent to a large curtain wall with thirty peepholes (I call them glorious-holes) cut into it at various heights, meant for a viewer to look into once they find the one they are most comfortable with. Inside, there is a series of videos that are being shown on a continuous loop, and feature the costumes being performed in different scenes (see *Figure 4*).

I'm curious to gauge an audience's reactions to the different forms these vessels take on, and probe them to reconsider their bodies in relation to them. There is a ceremonial-like, theatrical quality to the way the pieces are hung (I think of the captivating and intimidating qualities of knight-armour adorning a hallway), and to the way that they lead to a central video which is behind black curtains. The peepholes are awkward and take some maneuvering to find one that feels (somewhat) comfortable, and I enjoy the voyeuristic feeling one gets when they interact with them because it's an intimate action. That intimacy can be a shared experience between my characters and audience, and that is something I want to push further down the road.

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<sup>7</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. "Nick Cave." britannica.com. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nick-Cave-American-artist>. (accessed March 11, 2019).



Figure 4: *kind of blue*. Video still, mixed media. 2019.

/ i n b e t w e e n /

in between body and dress /*my skin begins*/

in between monster and maker

in between making and performing /*the words are found*/

in between talking /*the words break down*/

broken b r o k e n  
 bones  
 of  
 robots, bears, aliens, queers.  
 they coalesce,  
 slow as molasssssssss  
 sticky (like seed) to the touch  
 they touch

when they do, they *touch*. somewhere

in between breed and brood

without a home, but with a place

in between *here and near and far and where*,

(like me),  
 they become  
 me



As I continue to make performances, I'm realizing the impact that this medium has on an audience as a unique form of communication. I aim to create characters and objects within worlds that are focused through a queer lens, and speak from an alternative way of knowing. I think re-focusing the centre of an epistemology to the margins, which in my work is specifically through a queer sensibility, allows for a more fluid and compassionate interpretation of the world. My work leaves space for fluid interpretation, which in turn can open up opportunities for alternative epistemologies to emerge. I think art affords us the ability to express the thoughts and ideas we have in a way that we couldn't do through other forms of communication. There is knowledge in messiness, and there is messiness to fluidity. That messiness not only has the capability of implicating a viewer to reconsider constructs to which the world is built upon, but also parallels concepts of queerness in general.

When I think of something messy, I think of something hard to decipher (a bunch of deviant crud in the corner), sticky (do they have to rub it in our face?), all over the place (and into the streets), and destroying order (or family values...). In relation to this, I often think of this Sheila Pepe quote: "The way I crochet is messy. It's messy love. It's not a purist love. I think queers can identify with that in a certain way. And I mean queer in the way that we used it when we were kids – like, 'You weirdo.' It just so happens in my life, 'You weirdo,' and, 'You woman who loves women' became part of the same thing."<sup>8</sup> This strikes a chord with me because I think instead of asking ourselves "Is this normal?," we should be telling ourselves "It's okay to be weird." Homogenizing queerness to make queers more normal shouldn't be what we strive for. It's okay to be weird and I want to celebrate weirdness. I want to help create a space for weirdos to feel justified and heard. I don't want the weird queers to be silenced or forgotten so that milquetoast queerness can be co-opted into the mainstream.

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8 Chaich, John, and Todd Oldham. *Queer Threads: crafting identity and community*. Ammo, 2018. vii.

## CHAPTER VI: (A)DRESSING JOSH, PERFORMING

It's important that it is my own body in the work that I make because I believe the more specific I am to my own narrative, thoughts, and vulnerabilities, the more potential I have to strike an empathetic moment with an outside viewer. When I perform, there is some push and pull between my body as Josh and my body as a performing character. This creates some muddiness with respect to a viewer's suspension of disbelief to varying degrees, depending on the performance and how much I choose to reveal of my body. I believe this muddiness creates a sense of unease in a viewer as well as a confusion of what a viewer is experiencing, which is further heightened by a reliance on gestural communication as opposed to a less didactic form, such as verbal communication. I think that the space I create where this sense of unease happens creates a mutual sense of vulnerability between myself and my audience, and that shared experience can allow for me to strike moments of empathy. By focusing that empathy around queer themes (non-gendered embrace and sex) and specifically my own queerness and narrative (coming out, finding my husband, finding love for myself, struggles with worth and communication), I can create work that evokes celebration, sadness, love, and humanity around a concept that some viewers may have felt was too abstract from their own experience and felt disconnected from. I hope a viewer can leave with an experience that isn't completely defined and just *was*, while thinking about their own experience in relation to the queer characters and things that I make. I would like to help them feel a bit more open to uncomfortable things that they may have felt distanced from.

Sex can be uncomfortable. Addressing queer sex practices within non-queer spaces can be especially uncomfortable. My work is sexual. Not Sexual, but sexual. Funny sexy, not super serious, and not uptight. Specifically it's gay, but there are some beautiful, awkward, hilarious

things that happen with sexual exploration that I think everyone can relate to, no matter what your orientation is. Combating inhibition is something that I'm personally invested in with relation to sexuality, and I am interested in it conceptually within my work and the creatures that I create.

Humour and playfulness is important when confronting topics like sex, sexuality, shame, and mental illness. Life can be fucking miserable, and joking about a lot of the hardships that happen to us allows us to deal with it instead of pretending everything is fine. Humour and absurdity go hand in hand, and I think humour is a powerful tool which can be used to initiate palpable change and fight for social justice, while “lessening the blow,” so to speak, through the intrinsic affability that humour affords us. Humour is a fantastic connective strategy that bridges gaps between people and opens up possibilities for learning and empathy.

The use of my fat big-boned body also plays into the history of comedy and societal tropes we have regarding large performing bodies. I think of other large performers that I've been exposed to in my life, such as Glenn Milstead (as Divine), John Candy, Edith Massey, Chris Farley... people that were absurd, slapstick, and used their bodies to be transgressive and heighten a sense of absurdity with their actions. They were also really tender and empathetic at times, which again was magnified by their body types and an implied imperfection and struggle with those body types. I think of this a lot in regards to creatures/monsters, and my own struggle with my body and self worth. The characters I make are reflections of that struggle, but they also impose the pride that they have in their existence as something *other* (costumed-big-queer-material-thing-clusters) that won't be bounded by our definitions of beauty, gender, and sexuality. I also look at artists, such as Martin Kersels and Nayland Blake, who also use their large, queer bodies to arouse surreal, absurd, and vulnerable moments in their practices through

performance and gesture; for example with Martin’s work, he uses his body to perform simple actions (falling, tripping, hugging, tossing) to highlight absurdities of the body, space, and movement.<sup>9</sup> Many of my performative gestures have been simple too (such as banging my head against a wall, touching another character’s hand, placing an object on a shelf) and like Martin, I want to create a sense of the absurd. I want to concentrate that sense around ritual in order to imply importance and create a loose narrative that the audience has to struggle with. Situating these types of movements in surreal and other-worldly spaces that I construct not only provides some context, but also, hopefully, brackets an audience within and gives them space to allow for that struggle to play out.



Figure 5: BEAROBO. Mixed media. 2018.

There are strong parallels between my practice and that of Nayland Blake, with how much of our work revolves around performing as costumed entities that are passive in the presence of acts from the audience that could range from sadistic to nurturing. A recent performance of Nayland’s comprised of dressing up as their fursona, *Gnomen* (a bear-bison creature) and inviting audience

members to take selfies, cuddle, or add ribbons to their furry costume.<sup>10</sup> This has an obvious

9 Mitchell-Innes & Nash. “Biography.” miandn.com. <http://www.miandn.com/artists/martin-kersels/works/1>. (accessed March 10, 2019).

10 New Museum. “Nayland Blake: Crossing Object (Inside Gnomen).” newmuseum.org. <https://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/1248/nayland-blake-crossing-object-inside-gnomen>. (accessed March 10, 2019).

relation to my character *BEAROBO* (bear-robot creature) who I recently performed as during MidWest Furfest 2018, which is the largest furry convention in the world. Both *Gnomen* and *BEAROBO* are animal-like creatures that are genderqueer and live somewhere within the borders of the furry fandom. *Gnomen* took on a more passive role however, becoming almost like a prop for people to interact with. *BEAROBO* has a lot more vigour, and struts around doing its own thing (when I become this character, I feel a bit like Dawn Davenport from the film *Female Trouble*, as she's strutting down the streets of Baltimore as a weird, glorious, outrageous drag diva). *BEAROBO* looks quite different from the more cartoon-y, PG and cleanly constructed furies that traditionally dominate convention spaces (see *Figure 5*). I wanted to insert my character into that space to challenge the norms of that space by providing an alternative creature that was weird, a little bit scary, sexual, and non-gender binary. The reception was overwhelmingly positive and accepting, and I (as Josh and *BEAROBO*) was able to navigate that inclusive space while also standing for queerness and sex-positivity. I would like intervene on more already constructed spaces like this, and ones that may seem less inclusive, as there is great potential for biases (my own and my audiences) to break away and become more inclusive. Moving forward, I am going to continue to pursue building narratives and characters that are even more fleshed out and specific to my own experience than the ones I have made so far.

## CHAPTER VII: |SPACE|

When I think of my work living in spaces, I don't see it only functioning within the traditional sense of the “art world”. I'm much more interested in doing performance in both alternative and public spaces, and in physical and virtual realms. That's not to say I can't also imagine my work in more traditional gallery spaces if these opportunities present themselves, as that is just another means to disseminate my work. I just find the ways those spaces function and the actions needed to exhibit in those venues can be unappealing, and I could effect way more change by performing/displaying in spaces that exist tertiary to the art world, where I might not be preaching to the converted. There is also a pretentiousness to art galleries that public and alternative spaces don't have, and I think that can offer some fruitful territory for me and my audience to experience and grow together. I think some of these spaces could include bars, convention spaces (furry and kink specifically), public spaces, protest spaces, online porn and BDSM sites, online video portals, gamer spaces, etc. Also, I would like to show my work in places where there might not be a large queer community. I want to be another positive queer and weird voice that makes other queer weirdos feel like they have some others out there to connect with. Finding those types of people and connecting with them was one of the most transformative and important things that I have done in my life. If I can create a space to allow that to happen for others, then it is greatly worth it for me to do so.

In the previous chapters, I mentioned a *push/pull* or *in between* with respect to me as a performing body and my objects, but this quality also exists in the spaces that I make. This space where things fluctuate allows for fluidity between things and is more interesting than any stagnant or defined space. However, because it is hard to pin down, the immediate response may be to want to reject it. By implicating the viewer in my work, I can get them more engaged and

conscious of what might be happening in front of them, and also make them more open to the fluidity of things. When I perform as my characters in a space that I create, my audience is implicated in my work because they inhabit the space with the characters and objects I've made. The gestures I perform, the placement of those objects, and the placement of the audience within that space feeds into how I can probe their expectations.

In my performance *glitterbug* (see *Figure 6*), I was thinking about involving my audience through the use of the installation space that I created. I made a large rug that seemed ceremonial and specific to the *glitterbug*, thereby defining the space for my audience to congregate (around the rug and not on it). My



*Figure 6: glitterbug. Installation/performance, mixed media. 2018.*

actions were repetitive, slow, and meditative, so as a viewer became aware of that, they knew what to expect from the space and could make a judgment of whether they wanted to sit down and watch or go do something else. Throughout the performance (and corroborated afterwards) I noticed that people were just happy to watch this weird thing and zone out a bit, which was a break from the heavily crowded areas in the rest of the gallery. In this piece, I purposefully didn't break too far away from the audience's expectations, as I wanted a vibe that was more chill and inclusive. I also wanted my audience and this strange dressed up creature to exist as equals in the space, despite my character's prescribed significance.



Figure 7: *[poly]*. Installation/performance, mixed media. 2019.

I would like to contrast this performance with a more recent performance, *[poly]* (see Figure 7). This performance mainly consisted of a character (named *polly*) in a space with geode-like forms and a glowing pod; the latter of which contained another character who was revealed halfway through the performance. There was no clear definition of a stage in the space, so the audience would walk freely around during moments of the performance where not much activity was happening. As soon as the characters started navigating the space, the audience members stood back. Because of the murkiness between audience and performer, there was a sense of anticipation and unease that implicated audience members into the space more-so than with *glitterbug*. In Chapter III I mentioned how space can act as a kind of skin – I think of a skin wrapping around my audience and cradling them inside the spaces I create with my characters.

*We are in this together, one skin.*

There is a disconnect in *innie/outie* between my body and someone else's body. We share a space, we share existing together, yet we're apart. Contained under one skin, but living as different bodies. Together but separate, our lived experiences are different from each other. Yet I'm hoping for a **want** to be there... not a want to understand necessarily, but a want to connect with something other than us.



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